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Before the Higher Education and Employment
Advancement Committee
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Senator Slap, Representative Elliott, Senator Witkos, Representative Haines, and members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you on behalf of the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities today.

SB 3 AN ACT REQUIRING THE BOARD OF REGENTS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION TO DEVELOP SEMINAR PROGRAMS FOR SMALL BUSINESSES.

CSCU strongly supports SB 3, which draws on the expertise of two of our entrepreneurial centers to provide educational opportunities to small businesses impacted by the pandemic. The Werth Innovation and Entrepreneurial Center at Housatonic Community College and the Entrepreneurial Center at Northwestern CT Community College have the subject matter expertise and flexible program models to provide business owners and their staff with seminars on a range of topics including electronic commerce, social media, marketing, small business technical support, and blockchain.

Both schools would offer these seminars in person and online to ease any barriers to participation. This professional development for employees can provide critical information and support at a time when businesses are trying to stabilize and grow and recover from the impacts of the pandemic. We look forward to partnering with chambers of commerce and other business associations to market the free program to employers immediately upon passage of the legislation.

HB 5115 AN ACT REQUIRING A PLAN TO INCREASE THE NUMBER OF CHILD CARE CENTERS ON OR NEAR EACH CAMPUS OF THE REGIONAL COMMUNITY TECHNICAL COLLEGES AND STATE UNIVERSITIES.

Statewide across the CSCU system, a lack of reliable, affordable child care poses a barrier to success for our students who are balancing the needs of their children and demands of school. In addition, limited child care slots on campus creates a challenge for our employees who are parents and must find services that fit their work schedules.

Currently eight of our institutions operate lab schools on our campuses and three more are in the development stages. Working with the Office of Early Childhood, we are stabilizing and investing in these centers to not only provide great early childhood education (ECE) for young learners but create high quality placements for our student teachers. The joint work of our Lab School Investments Project provides financial support to Lab Schools at CSCU, UCONN and among CCIC schools, professional development opportunities for ECE staff and students, and increased collaboration with community providers. This exciting project is just getting underway this spring and we look forward to sharing the results of this effort with you in the future.

However, there is always more we can do, and HB 5115 can help to provide additional resources to identify strategies for providing child care outside of the traditional lab school model and at times and in formats that better meet parents' needs. For instance, one of our colleges offers a drop-in center

allowing for more flexible schedules and operates as a co-op model with parents volunteering as part of the staffing model. Further exploration of models for non-traditional hours and approaches would help to expand current services to more parents ultimately leading to higher quality educational experiences for the state's youngest children. We welcome the opportunity to deepen our work with the Office of Early Childhood and identify ways to expand our services in line with the goals of this legislation.

SB 17 AN ACT PROHIBITING AN INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION FROM WITHHOLDING TRANSCRIPTS.

While we applaud the goals of this legislation and appreciate the policy discussions that have already begun related to this issue, there are a few considerations that are important for the committee to take into account with this proposal.

First, transcript holds are one of the tools available to institutions of higher education to help collect on debt that is owed to that institution. The other options that are available include referral of that debt to a debt collection agency, or for public institutions, we have the option of utilizing the state's tax intercept program. While transcript holds can have a negative impact on students, the institution still retains an ability to work with those students to engage in limited release of their transcript to employers or others to help them improve their ability to repay that debt. One of the unintended consequences of prohibiting the use of transcript holds may be that more students will be referred to collections or to tax intercept where not only will the financial impact be greater and more immediate to those students, but the ability of institutions to work with those students to negotiate a repayment plan or other solution will be drastically curtailed.

Second, the issue of withholding transcripts by institutions of higher education is currently a subject of the latest round of negotiated rulemaking by the US Department of Education (ED). These work sessions are scheduled for March 14-18, and the current conversations have spanned everything from a limited scope targeting transcripts held by institutions at risk of closure to a broad ban targeting all institutions. The results of these work sessions will inform the new proposed regulatory language ED will put forward later this year. Because these regulations are anticipated later this year, we encourage the committee to continue this important conversation but to hold off on action until ED issues new regulations.

More can be done as a sector to improve the way that transcript holds are utilized and to mitigate adverse impacts to students, and CSCU is committed to working with all our stakeholders on this goal. However, we should be sure to have a thoughtful and thorough conversation to avoid unintended consequences for students and duplicative or inflexible regulatory environments for institutions.

SB 251 AN ACT EXPANDING TRAINING PROGRAMS FOR CAREERS IN HEALTH CARE.

CSCU strongly supports the concepts raised in SB 251. Our entire system, along with the partners listed in the legislation have all been actively working together, facilitated in large part by the Office of Workforce Strategy (OWS), to coordinate our health care career efforts with the Governor's Workforce Council priorities for the industry--all goals aligned with this legislation.

Our system provides a range of health care programs, from entry level, non-credit nurse aid training and pharmacy tech courses, to certificate and degrees in health technology fields, to our undergraduate and graduate degrees in nursing. Our programs have been impacted by the pandemic with fewer enrollees than capacity in some programs and more demand than can be met with current resources in others.

This constricted enrollment comes at the same time, the state's employers are seeing a decrease in the available workforce that is impacting their service delivery.

With the decrease in the virus in the state, we are looking forward to increasing our enrollment this summer and fall and therefore increasing our graduates into key workforce areas. In particular, with \$55M in funding included in the Governor's budget, CSCU would lead an effort with OWS to expand enrollment in nursing and behavioral health programs. With huge demand for employees and client services in these areas, CSCU will work with all higher education institutions, relevant state agencies, and health care employers and associations to:

- expand higher education capacity for additional students through hiring more faculty,
- partner with health care employers to identify and support alternative and accelerated pathways such as online programs and on-the-job training to completing degrees and certificates,
- offer tuition assistance to students, particularly underrepresented students, in degree programs in nursing and behavioral health,
- offer loan forgiveness in partnership with Department of Public Health.

We are confident that the investment called for in the Governor's budget and its focus on nursing and behavioral health professions provide the foundation to stabilize and expand this critical workforce for the state's employers. We would recommend working on consolidating any outstanding goals and objectives outlined in SB 251 within the Governor's proposal.

HB 5135 AN ACT EXPANDING THE ROBERTA B. WILLIS SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM TO STUDENTS OF PRIVATE OCCUPATIONAL SCHOOLS.

While the goal of expanding scholarship offerings to more students is laudable, the unintended consequence of this bill would mean fewer scholarship offerings for students at public and private non-profit institutions of higher education to the benefit of for-profit private occupational schools. Connecticut is already far behind many of our peer states in funding for need-based state scholarships. Expanding the limited funding we do have available to for-profit institutions will only leave us further behind. Additionally, the intent of the Roberta B. Willis Scholarship Program and its precursor programs was always to support accessibility and affordability for Connecticut residents to attend Connecticut public and non-profit institutions of higher education. Extending the program to the for-profit industry would represent a massive change in the scope and intent of the program.

HB 5300 AN ACT REQUIRING LEGISLATIVE APPROVAL FOR THE MERGER OR CLOSING OF INSTITUTIONS WITHIN THE CONNECTICUT STATE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES AND PROHIBITING THE CONSOLIDATION OF THE REGIONAL COMMUNITY-TECHNICAL COLLEGES.

HB 5300 removes the authority to close or merge an institution from the Board of Regents for Higher Education (BOR) and places the burden of that authority onto the legislature—creating both statutory and accreditation concerns. It also prohibits the merger of our community colleges.

Under CGS 10a-6, the legislature has charged the BOR with the responsibility to govern and manage CSCU (CGS 10a-104 does the same for the Board of Trustees for the University of Connecticut). The BOR and CSCU take this responsibility very seriously.

However, HB 5300 fundamentally undermines the ability of the BOR to govern the institutions under its authority. The decision to merge or close an institution is not one that is made lightly. Particularly in the case of closures, this decision is often the last resort after all other viable solutions have been explored and exhausted. These decisions are made in close consultation with the institution's accrediting body to ensure that the plan to merge or close meets the standards of accreditation as well as the policies and procedures required by that accrediting body.

The New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) is the regional accrediting agency for the colleges and universities under the BOR, and it is the role of the commission to review and approve mergers and closings. NECHE has been very clear that their governance standard 3.3 requires sufficient independence for governing boards to act in the institution's best interest. In past comments before this legislature, NECHE has noted that the Commission has invoked this standard in cases where this independence has been infringed upon. It is vital that approvals of mergers or closure continue to be governed by the BOR and NECHE, rather than creating a political process. Governing boards, institutions, and accreditors make these decisions based on what is best for the students, institutions, and communities they serve, not based on what is the popular or politically expeditious solution.

As you are aware, CSCU has been working for the last five years on a plan to merge our twelve community colleges into one accredited institution, known as Connecticut State Community College (CT State). The goals of the merger are to enhance student outcomes and provide the financial stability in a way that keeps all our campuses open, even as our community colleges are facing unprecedented enrollment and fiscal challenges.

Last week, a delegation from CSCU attended the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) meeting in Boston to present our request for a substantive change regarding the merger of the 12 community colleges into CT State. We are thrilled to share with you that we have received word that the Commission has accepted the substantive change proposal.

It is important to note that Section 2 of this legislation would not only undermine the BOR's authority, but would as well undermine and override the actions and approvals of our accrediting body. HB 5300 would significantly erode the BOR's independence and ability to effectively govern the institutions under its authority. It would also undo over five years of work that has gone into CT State, which is being done for the betterment of our students and the state.

I urge the committee to take no action on this bill.